

## Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14 What's the Meaning of Life?

What is the meaning of life? Over the course of the last eight weeks we have considered many of the different paths that people take to make sense of life. We've looked at the thrill seeker, the money grabber, the power hungry and the love-struck. And whilst the teacher hasn't shied away from saying that there is some joy to be found in all these things, we have also seen how ultimately futile it is to make any of those things our ultimate goal. Those who seek after love face heartbreak or eventual separation: those who seek after money face disappointment or all their hard earned wealth being given to someone else: those who seek after experience find it fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying: and those who seek after fame and success find that even their best efforts are soon forgotten and their works are superseded.

The truth is that none of these things, good as many of them are, can give us true fulfilment in this life. And of course if death is all that awaits us then all of these things are ultimately meaningless: as firm and lasting as foggy vapour. These few years on earth spent under the tyranny of time pass so quickly, and if this life is all there then all our achievements, all our successes and joys end up being as nothing more than taking seasickness pills on the Titanic, something to smooth out the ride on our way to the bottom.

Of course even the most confirmed atheist doesn't live like this world is all there is, even if they believe it. To live life convinced of your own insignificance and ultimate worthlessness leads either to the darkest depression or to an absolute self-centred hedonism where we eat and drink or do whatever we like, no matter who it hurts, because tomorrow we die! So instead the people of our age live a life of make-believe. Hiding from the truths they claim to believe they focus on the now; they keep busy with frivolities and fun and facebook and tell themselves sweet fairytales to make the darkness go away. One author called it 'amusing ourselves to death' and so many of our neighbours and friends spend their lives doing just that.

But the writer of Ecclesiastes won't let us get away with that kind of thinking. He wants us to wake up and see the meaninglessness or the foggy-vapour-ness of that world view not to leave us in despair but because he has something solid and certain he wants us to see. His repeated cry of "*Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!*" with which he ends his teaching in chapter 12 verse 8 is there to remind us just what he has been trying to show us. Without God, without his light, his truth and his redeeming presence it is all meaningless. But with him; with a personal relationship with the God of the Bible we not only find significance in the present and a sure hope for the future, we find that with God there is the kind of joy and peace for which our souls have been longing all along.

And so our studies bring us to the conclusion of the book. But before we get to the last few verses I want to take a brief look at the rest of our reading because we find their two wonderful pieces of advice to help us make the most out of life. You see whilst as Christians we are supposed to be heavenly minded in the sense that we are so thrilled with the prospect of Heaven and seeing the Lord in all his glory that we are able to be content here on earth no matter what our circumstances, that doesn't mean refusing all the joys and pleasures this world has to offer.

So what is the advice? Firstly we are to rejoice, and secondly we are to remember.

### **1: Rejoice!**

I don't know whether you remember the Blackadder series when Edmund's puritan aunt and uncle turn up to see him. Dressed all in white, and covered in crosses they seem disapprove of everything and are about as anti-fun and anti-joy as it is possible to be. And the problem is that Christians get lumped into the same boat. Billy Joel seemed to hint at the same thing in his song "only the good die young!" The song talks

about a girl whose faith stops her from having fun and plenty of people think that to be a Christian is to miss out on life's joys. No drink, no drugs, no sex, no music – unless you count Songs of Praise, being little goody two shoes who work so hard and pray so much that life is nothing but a dirge.

Of course over the centuries Christians have sometimes been defined by the things that they won't do – but to let ourselves be described in that way is a travesty. The Christian life is about joy. The world is full of good things which we are supposed to enjoy with thankfulness in our hearts. Many people of my age and older remember Sundays as the dullest day of the week because church was boring and no one was allowed to have any fun. I remember when the only shops open on Sundays were garden centres! And oh how I loathed being dragged around those on a Sunday afternoon. But Sunday is a day of rejoicing, a day of celebrating, a day when God's family comes together to eat together and enjoy hearing the good news of God's love and mercy in the company of fellow believers and in the presence of God.

And the Teacher wants us to see that doesn't he! Look down at verse 7 and verse 8: *"light is sweet, and it pleases the eye to see the sun. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all."* The advice of the teacher is to recognise that life is good and enjoy it.

And that's a theme that runs right through the Bible. God is a God of joy who gives good gifts to his children and he wants, in fact he expects us, to enjoy them. So when God brought the people out of Israel and gave them the law and the pattern of sacrifices, their seasons were punctuated by times of festival and celebration where people ate and drank in each other's company, celebrating the blessings God had given. And whilst people might think that God's laws simply suck the joy out of life Psalm 19 verse 8 says that the Lord's *"precepts are right, bringing joy to the heart and light to the eyes."*

Speaking in John chapter 10 Jesus says that he had come to bring life and life in all its fullness. Friends, Jesus is the joy bringer. That's why in the fruit of the Spirit joy is only preceded by love. Life is there to be enjoyed. You are to be thankful for the things you have and you are to praise God for them and not feel guilty about enjoying it.

So eat well and enjoy your food. Take a glass of wine or a well matured port or a craftsman brewed bitter and enjoy every single mouthful. Spend time with your family and your friends playing games, talking about the events of the day. Walk in the countryside, swim in the sea, climb mountains and explore the wonderful world that God has created. And make sure you find joy in the more mundane things of life as well: watch a good movie, read great books, listen to music, dance, find a spouse, raise a family, take risks, live wholeheartedly, love extravagantly and give generously. When you wake up in the morning feel your fingers and your toes, however much they may be aching, rejoice that they are there, rejoice in your senses; rejoice that your heart continues to beat because every day is a gift and life is full of pleasures to be enjoyed.

Is that your attitude to life or do you feel rather guilty about having such pleasures. Don't! *"Light is sweet and however many years anyone may live let them enjoy them."* The Christian should be someone full of joy and the advice of the teacher is to rejoice!

Now that may sound like hedonism gone wild and that I'm encouraging you to throw off all restraint, and to do what verse 9 suggests and *"follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see."* But freedom without restraint never brings full and complete joy. So whilst on the one hand the teacher wants us to enjoy life to the full he wants us to do that in the context of remembering.

## 2: Remember!

And there are two things he wants us to remember in this passage: That God's judgement is a reality and old age is coming. The first is a restraint so we take a longer term view on pleasure and the second is a spur to make the most of the time we have.

I think it's fair to say that we all want to be happy. Apart from Victor Meldrew it's rare to find someone who likes being miserable. No, people want to be happy and most of our lives are spent, at least when we think about things seriously, seeking the greatest joy. We change jobs because we will enjoy the new job more whether that's because we will have more money to spend or because the work will be far more interesting. We decide where to go on holiday based on how much we will enjoy it and we make the same decision about books and films and how we spend our time. But so often we only look in the short term. How much joy will I get in the next hour or the next week or the next year by doing this or that. But the teacher wants to lift our heads above the tyranny of time to see eternity and to see that we can experience far, far, far greater joy and eternally lasting pleasures if we take seriously the reality of God's promise of a day of judgement.

You see there are some things which look good but which ultimately do us harm. As a teenager I had a terrible gambling problem and I knew the thrill of watching those reels spin around and around and thinking that this time I was going to win. But the buzz doesn't last and in the cold light of day when the debts mount and the losses stack up that temporary joy suddenly feels worthless. And the same is true about many things in life whether heavy drinking or drug taking or seeking one sexual partner after another or chasing after material pleasures like a better phone or the latest gadget or a flashier car or designer handbag.

You see not everything our heart wants is good for us. Not everything our heart desires will bring us lasting joy. There are some things which the Lord has said we should avoid because they are not good for us, and other things that we should avoid because they are wrong. And one day there will be a reckoning and if we have sought after pleasure in this world without thinking about the eternal pleasures that are there for all those who trust in Christ, then we will end up the poorer. God's judgment is a reality – let's remember that and make sure we are only enjoying those things which God says are good.

But if the remembrance of a day of judgement is meant to restrain us, the teacher doesn't want us to go too far. He also wants us to give us a spur to seize the day and remember that old age is coming and that life is short!

We are not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and restrict ourselves so much that we have no joy in the present because we are worried about the judgement to come. If we have been saved by faith in Christ and his death on the cross in our place, then we have no fears about the future and we can live in the freedom of God's law to enjoy the life he has given.

Now I know I've only reached 50, but there are some things in these verses which ring true. My eyesight is nowhere near as good as it was, certain joints are getting stiff, and things that didn't used to frighten me now do. There was a time I would have done a bungee jump but now it's too late!

And that's what those verses at the beginning of chapter 12 are about. It's a wonderful poem, packed full of images and metaphors about old age. So the grinders in verse 3 are teeth, which wear out. And those "*looking through the windows growing dim*" in the same verse, well that's a metaphor of our fading

eyesight. The almond tree blossom is the grey hair that seems to be growing far more quickly now than it ever did before, and so it goes on.

And the teacher wants us to remember that we should not put off enjoying the things of life until it is too late. Life is short and fleeting and days of trouble will come, he says, when it's harder to find pleasure in life because the pains and frailties of our ageing bodies and the regrets of the past are so many that they stop us from doing the things we'd like to.

Carpe Diem! Seize the day! Time is short – enjoy life while you can because old age is coming and death won't be far behind.

That's why we need to live life to the full: remembering both God's commands and the certainty of a day of judgement, and making good use of the time we have been given.

But there's a final piece of advice the teacher has for us – well three bits of advice really – which sums up all the teacher has been trying to say, and we find them in the last 6 verses.

The antidote to a life of foggy vapour, the way to find a life of true meaning and purpose and lasting joy is to respond to God in three ways: to stop searching, fear God and obey his commands.

### **3: Respond!**

Stop searching: You may still feel that the book of Ecclesiastes is a strange book but is in the Bible because the teacher wrote these words guided and inspired by Almighty God. The Lord is the one Shepherd referred to in verse 11 and since he is also the creator and sustainer of the world, the one who brought all things into being and who holds all things in place, understanding his pattern for life must surely take precedent over every other. How can we listen to anyone else's advice when we have the maker's instructions?

And yet so many people hear the good news of Jesus, see that it makes sense, and then go searching for something else. Now of course there are many competing philosophies out there in the world, just as there are many different religions. But so many people today are after philosophy that suits them and their lifestyle, and they will sacrifice truth to get it. But such a choice brings only short-term comfort and leaves them with nothing but a god made in their own image who is really no god at all.

That's why the clear advice of the teacher is to stop searching. We have in our hands this morning true wisdom in the pages of the Scriptures, and in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ himself we have wisdom incarnate. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, the good Shepherd, the light of the world, the gate to glory and the judge of the ages: why on earth would we look anywhere else? Stop searching! In the pages of the Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ you have all you need to live life to the full. Stop searching.

Secondly, Fear God.

This isn't about cowering in fear before Almighty God and being afraid to come into his presence, although without Jesus as our redeemer that is exactly how we will react when we see him. Fearing God is about recognising who we are in comparison to him. It is relating to God in the right way, recognising his ultimate authority, his unlimited power, his glory and majesty, his awesome might and his perfect Holiness compared to our poverty and weakness and sinfulness.

Fearing God means coming to him on his terms; accepting his verdict on us and our need for true repentance. But it also means accepting his means of salvation and not trying to add to it ourselves. The Bible is clear that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the death of Jesus Christ alone. And since salvation is God's business we need to accept God's word on the matter and take advantage of the mercy he so freely offers to all who ask. We are to stop searching and fear God.

But fearing God is not a one off event, it is something that should define our live as we Discover and then obey his commands.

Living the wise life, living a life of eternal significance and lasting joy means a life spent obeying God. That means we need to be people who read God's word and are willing to trust and obey God's commands, even when they clash with our preferences or our culture. It means obeying God's word when our hearts try to pull us away because we know that God's word is true and reliable and his commands are ultimately life giving. And it means being willing to take up our cross and follow Christ, whatever the cost in this life, because we trust him that the eternal glories to come will far outweigh anything we suffer or give up on earth.

Stopping searching, fearing God, and keeping his commandments is the duty of all people. It is the meaning of life and the way of eternal life; the way of true joy and the only way to avoid a life of foggy vapour and a lost eternity. Hear the words of the teacher. Soak up his God-given wisdom and live your life to the full.

As Christians we have so much to be thankful for, so many reasons to celebrate, so much to enjoy and so much to look forward to. May God plant his wisdom in our hearts and help us to live the life in all its fullness that Jesus came to give us. Because when we do not only will our hearts overflow with joy and praise but others will see it and want it too so that ultimately God himself receives the glory.